

The Yukon Trail

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

An Alaskan Love Story

Copyright, William Macleod Raine.

CHAPTER XXI—Continued.

While they ate, the party went into committee of the whole to decide what was best to be done. Gordon noticed that in all the tentative suggestions made by Holt and Swiftwater the comfort of Sheba was the first thing in mind.

The girl, too, noticed it and smilingly protested, her soft hand lying for the moment on the gnarled one of the old miner.

"It doesn't matter about me. We have to think of what will be best for Mr. Holt, of how to get him to the proper care. My comfort can wait."

The plan at last decided upon was that Gordon should make a dash for Smith's Crossing on snowshoes, where he was to arrange for a relief party to come out for the injured man and Mrs. Olson. He was to return at once without waiting for the rescuers. Next morning he and Sheba would start with Holt's dog team for Kuslak.

Macdonald had taught Sheba how to use snowshoes and she had been an apt pupil. From her suitcase she got out her moccasins and put them on. She borrowed the snowshoes of Holt, wrapped herself in her parka, and announced that she was going with Elliot part of the way.

Gordon thought her movements a miracle of suppleness. Her lines had the swelling roundness of vital youth, her eyes were alive with the eagerness that time dulls in most faces. They spoke little as they swept forward over the white snow wastes. The spell of the great North was over her. Its mystery was stirring in her heart, just as it had been when her lips had turned to his at the sunrise. As for him, love ran through his veins like old wine. But he allowed his feelings no expression. For though she had come to him of her own accord for that one blessed minute at dawn, he could not be sure what had moved her so deeply. She was treading a world primeval, the wonder of it still in her soft eyes. Would she waken to love or to disillusion?

He took care to see that she did not tire. Presently he stopped and held out his hand to say good-by.

"Will you come back this way?" she asked.

"Yes. I ought to get here soon after dark. Will you meet me?"

She gave him a quick, shy little nod, turned without shaking hands, and struck out for the cabin. All through the day happiness flooded her heart. While she waited on Holt or helped Mrs. Olson cook or watched Swiftwater while he put up the tent in the lee of the cabin, little snatches of song bubbled from her lips. Sometimes they were bits of old Irish ballads that popped into her mind. Once, while she was preparing some coffee for her patient, it was a stanza from Burns:

Till at the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt with the sun,
I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands of life shall run.

She caught old Gideon looking at her with a queer little smile on his weather-tanned face and she felt the color beat into her cheeks.

"I haven't bought a wedding present for twenty years," he told her presently, apropos of nothing that had been said. "I won't know what's the proper thing to get, Miss Sheba."

"If you talk nonsense like that I'll go out and talk to Mr. Swiftwater Pete," she threatened, blushing.

Old Gid folded his hands meekly. "I'll be good—honest I will. Let's see. I got to make safe and sane conversation, have I? Huh! Wonder when that lazy, long-legged, good-for-nothing horsethief and holdup that calls himself Gordon Elliot will get back to camp."

Sheba looked into his twinkling eyes suspiciously as she handed him his coffee. For a moment she bit her lip to keep back a smile, then said with mock severity:

"Now, I am going to leave you to Mrs. Olson."

When sunset came it found Sheba on the trail. Swiftwater Pete had offered to go with her, but she had been relieved of his well-meant kindness by the demand of Holt.

"No, you don't, Pete. You ain't goin' off gallivantin' with no young lady. You're a-goin' to stay here and fix my game leg for me. What do you reckon Miss Sheba wants with a fat, top-sided lummock like you along with her?"

Pete grew purple with embarrassment. He had not intended anything more than civility and he wanted this understood.

"Hmp! Ain't you got no sense a-tall, Gid? If Miss Sheba's bent on goin' to meet Elliot, I allowed some one ought to go along and keep the dark off her. 'Course there ain't nothin' going to harm her, unless she goes and gets lost—"

Sheba's smile cooled the heat of the stage driver. "Which she isn't going to do. Good of you to offer to go with me. Don't mind Mr. Holt. Everybody knows he doesn't mean half of what he says. I'd be glad to have you come with me, but it isn't necessary at all. So I'll not trouble you."

Darkness fell quickly, but Sheba still held to the trail. There was no sign

of Elliot, but she felt sure he would come soon. Meanwhile she followed steadily the tracks he had made earlier in the day.

She stopped at last. It was getting much colder. She was miles from the camp. Reluctantly she decided to return. Then, out of the darkness, he came abruptly upon her, the man whom she had come out to meet.

Under the magic of the Northern stars they found themselves again in each other's arms for that brief moment of joyful surprise. Then, as it had been in the morning, Sheba drew herself shyly away.

"They are waiting supper for us," she told him irrelevantly.

He did not shout out his happiness and tell her to let them wait. For Gordon, too, felt awed at this wonderful adventure of love that had befallen them. It was enough for him that they were moving side by side, alone in the deep snows and the biting cold, that waves of emotion crashed through his pulses when his swinging hand touched hers.

They were acutely conscious of each other. Excitement burned in the eyes that turned to swift, reluctant meetings. She was a woman, and he was her lover. Neither of them dared quite accept the fact yet, but it filled the background of all their thoughts with delight.

Sheba did not want to talk of this new, amazing thing that had come into her life. It was too sacred a subject to discuss just yet even with him. So she began to tell him odd fancies from childhood that lingered in her Celtic heart, tales of the "little folk" that were half memories and half imaginings, stirred to life by some old association of sky and stars. She laughed softly at herself as she told them, but Gordon did not laugh at her.

Everything she did was for him divinely done. Even when his eyes were on the dark trail ahead he saw only the dusky loveliness of curved cheek, the face luminous with a radiance some women are never privileged to know, the rhythm of head and body and slender legs that was part of her individual heaven-sent charm.

The rest finished supper before Gordon and Sheba reached camp, but Mrs. Olson had a hot meal waiting for them. "I fixed up the tent for the women folks—stove, sleeping bags, plenty of wood. Touch a match to the fire and it'll be snug as a bug in a rug," explained Swiftwater to Gordon.

Elliot and Sheba were to start early for Kuslak and later the rescue party would arrive to take care of Holt and Mrs. Olson.

"Time to turn in," Holt advised. "You better light that stove, Elliot." The young man was still in the tent arranging the sleeping bags when Sheba entered. He tried to walk out without touching her, intending to call back his good-night. But he could not do it. There was something fancey about her tonight that went to his head. Her tender, tremulous little smile and the turn of her buoyant little head stirred in him a lover's rhapsody.

"It's to be a long trail we cover tomorrow, Sheba. You must sleep. Good night."

"Good night—Gordon."

There was a little flash of audacity in the whimsical twist of her mouth. It was the first time she had ever called him by his given name.

Elliot threw away prudence and caught her by the hands.

"My dear—my dear!" he cried.

She trembled to his kiss, gave herself to his embrace with innocent passion. Tendrils of hair, fine as silk, brushed his cheeks and sent strange thrills through him.

They talked the incoherent language of lovers that is compounded of murmurs and silences and the touch of lips and the meetings of eyes. There were to be other nights in their lives as rich in memories as this, but never another with quite the same delight.

Presently Sheba reminded him with a smile of the long trail he had mentioned. Mrs. Olson bustled into the tent, and her presence stressed the point.

"Good night, neighbors," Gordon called back from outside the tent.

Sheba's "Good night" echoed softly back to him.

The girl fell asleep to the sound of the light breeze slapping the tent and to the doleful howling of the huskies.

CHAPTER XXII.

A Message From the Dead.

Macdonald drove his team into the teeth of the storm. The wind came in gusts. Sometimes the gale was so stiff that the dogs could scarcely crawl forward against it; again there were moments of comparative stillness, followed by squalls that slapped the driver in the face like the whipping of a loose sail on a catboat.

High drifts made the trail difficult. Not once but fifty times Macdonald left the gee-pole to break a way through snow-waves for the sled. The best he could get out of his dogs was three miles an hour, and he knew that there was not another team or driver in the North could have done so well.

It was close to noon when he reached a division of the road known as the Fork. One trail ran down to the river

and up it to the distant creeks. The other led across the divide, struck the Yukon, and pointed a way to the coast. White drifts had long since blotted out the track of the sled that had preceded him. Had the fugitives gone up the river to the creeks with intent to hoist themselves up for the winter? Or was it their purpose to cross the divide and go out over the ice to the coast?

The pursuer knew that Gid Holt was wise as a weasel. He could follow blindfolded the paths that led to every creek in the gold-fields. It might be taken as a certainty that he had not plunged into such a desperate venture without having a plan well worked out beforehand. Elliot had a high grade of intelligence. Would they try to reach the coast and make their get-away to Seattle? Or would they dig themselves in till the heavy snows were past and come back to civilization with the story of a lucky strike to account for the gold they brought with them? Neither gold dust nor nuggets could be identified. There would be no way of proving the story false. The only evidence against them would be that they had left at Kuslak and this was merely of a corroborative kind. There would be no chance of convicting them upon it.

To strike for Seattle was to throw away all pretense of innocence. Fugitives from justice, they would have to disappear from sight in order to escape. The hunt for them would continue until at last they were unearthed.

One fork of the road led to comparative safety; the other went by devious windings to the penitentiary and perhaps the gallows. The Scotsman put himself in the place of the men he was trailing. Given the same conditions, he knew which path he would follow.

Macdonald took the trail that led down to the river, to the distant gold creeks which offered a refuge from man-hunters in many a deserted cabin marooned by the deep snows.

Even the iron frame and steel muscles of the Scotch-Canadian protested against the task he had set them that day. It was a time to sit snugly inside by a stove and listen to the howling of the wind as it hurled itself down from the divide. But from daylight till dark Colby Macdonald fought with drifts and breast the storm. He got into the harness with the dogs. He broke trail for them, cheered them, soothed, comforted, punished. Long after night had fallen he staggered into the hut of two prospectors, his parka so stiff with frozen snow that it had to be beaten with a hammer before the coat could be removed.

"How long since a dog team passed—seven huskies and two men?" was his first question.

"No dog team has passed for four days," one of the men answered.

"You mean you haven't seen one," Macdonald corrected.

"I mean none has passed—unless it went by in the night while we slept. And even then our dogs would have warned us."

Macdonald flung his ice-coated gloves to a table and stooped to take off his mukluks. His face was blue with the cold, but the bleak look in the eyes



Slowly Macdonald Moved Toward It.

came from within. He said nothing more until he was free of his wet clothes. Then he sat down heavily and passed a hand over his frozen eyebrows.

"Get me something to eat and take care of my dogs. There is food for them on the sled," he said.

While he ate he told them of the bank robbery and the murder. Their resentment against the men who had done it was quite genuine. There could be no doubt they told the truth when they said no sled had preceded his. They were honest, reliable prospectors. He knew them both well.

The weary man slept like a log. He opened his eyes next morning to find one of his hosts shaking him.

"Six o'clock, Mr. Macdonald. Your breakfast is ready. Jim is looking out for the huskies."

Half an hour later the Scotsman gave the order, "Mush!" He was off again, this time on the back trail as far as the Narrows, from which point he meant to strike across to intersect the fork of the road leading to the divide.

The storm had passed and when the late sun rose it was in a blue sky. Fine enough the day was overcast, but the slushy snow, where it was worn thin on the river by the sweep of the wind, made heavy travel for the dogs. Macdonald was glad enough to reach the Narrows, where he could turn from the river and cut across to hit the trail of the men he was following. He had about five miles to go before he would reach the Smith Crossing road and every foot of it he would have to break trail for the dogs. This was slow business, since he had no partner at the gee-pole. Back and forth, back and forth he trudged, beating down the loose snow for the runners. It was a hill trail, and the drifts were in most places not very deep. But the Scotsman was doing the work of two, and at a killing pace.

Over a ridge the team plunged down into a little park where the snow was deeper. Macdonald, breaking trail across the mountain valley, found his feet weighted with packed ice slush so that he could hardly move them. When at last he had beaten down a path for his dogs he stood breathing deep at the summit of the slope. Before them lay the main road to Smith's Crossing, scarce fifty yards away. He gave a deep whoop of triumph, for along it ran the wavering tracks left by a sled. He was on the heels of his enemy at last.

As he turned back to his Siberian hounds, the eyes of Macdonald came to abrupt attention. On the hillside, not ten yards from him, something stuck out of the snow like a signpost. It was the foot of a man.

Slowly Macdonald moved toward it. He knew well enough what he had stumbled across—one of the tragedies that in the North are likely to be found in the wake of every widespread blizzard. Some unfortunate traveler, blinded by the white swirl, had wandered from the trail and had staggered up a draw to his death.

With a little digging the Alaskan uncovered a leg. The man had died where he had fallen, face down. Macdonald scooped away the snow and found a pack strapped to the back of the buried man. He cut the thongs and tried to ease it away. But the gunnysack had frozen to the parka. When he pulled, the rotten sacking gave way under the strain. The contents of the pack spilled out.

The eyes in the grim face of Macdonald grew hard and steely. He had found, by some strange freak of chance, much more than he had expected to find. Using his snowshoe as a shovel, he dug the body free and turned it over. At sight of the face he gave a cry of astonishment.

Gordon overslept. His plan had been to reach Kuslak at the end of a long day's travel, but that had meant getting on the trail with the first gleam of light. When he opened his eyes Mrs. Olson was calling him to rise.

He dressed and stepped out into the cold, crisp morning. From the hill crech the sun was already pouring down a great, fanlike shaft of light across the snow vista. Swiftwater Pete passed behind him on his way to the stable and called a cheerful good morning in his direction.

Mrs. Olson had put the stove outside the tent and Gordon lifted it to the spot where they did the cooking.

"Good morning, neighbor," he called to Sheba. "Sleep well?"

The little rustling sounds within the tent ceased. A face appeared in the doorway, the flaps drawn discreetly close beneath the chin.

"Never better. Is my breakfast ready yet?"

"Come and help me make it. Mrs. Olson is waiting on Holt."

"When I'm dressed," The smiling face disappeared. "Dublin Bay" sounded in her fresh young voice from the tent. Gordon joined in the song as he lit the fire and sliced bacon from a frozen slab of it.

The howling of the huskies interrupted the song. They had evidently heard something that excited them. Gordon listened. Was it in his fancy only that the breeze carried to him the faint jingle of sleigh-bells? The sound, if it was one, died away. The cook turned to his job.

He stopped sawing at the meat, knife and bacon both suspended in the air. On the hard snow there had come to him the crunch of a foot behind him. Whose? Sheba was in the tent, Swiftwater at the stable, Mrs. Olson in the house. Slowly he turned his head.

What Elliot saw sent the starch through his body. He did not move an inch, still sat crouched by the fire, but every nerve was at tension, every muscle taut. For he was looking at a rifle lying negligently in brown, steady hands. They were very sure hands, very competent ones. He knew that because he had seen them in action.

The owner of the hands was Colby Macdonald.

The Scotch-Canadian stood at the edge of a willow grove. His face was grim as the day of judgment.

"Don't move," he ordered.

Elliot laughed irritably. He was both annoyed and disgusted.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"You."

"What's worrying you now? Do you think I'm jumping my bond?"

"You're going back to Kuslak with me—to give a life for the one you took."

"What's that?" cried Gordon, surprised.

"Just as I'm telling you. I've been on your heels ever since you left town. You and Holt are going back with me as my prisoners."

"But what for?"

"For robbing the bank and killing Robert Milton, as you know well enough."

"Is this another plan arranged for me by you and Selfridge?" demanded Elliot.

Macdonald ignored the question and lifted his voice. "Come out of that tent, Holt—and come with your hands up unless you want your head blown off."

"Holt isn't in that tent, you idiot. If you want to know—"

"Come now, if you expect to come alive," cut in the Scotsman ominously. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and covered the shadow thrown by the sun on the figure within.

Gordon flung out a wild protest and threw the frozen slab of bacon at the head of Macdonald. With the same motion he launched his own body across the stove. A fifth of a second earlier the tent flap had opened and Sheba had come out.

The sight of her paralyzed Macdonald and saved her lover's life. It distracted the mine-owner long enough for him to miss his chance. A bullet struck the stove and went off at a tangent through the tent canvas not two feet from where Sheba stood. A second went speeding toward the sun. For Gordon had followed the football player's instinct and dived for the knees of his enemy.

They went down together. Each squirming for the upper place, they rolled over and over. The rifle was forgotten. Like cave men they fought, crushing and twisting each other's muscles with the blind lust of primordial to kill. As they clinched with one arm, they struck savagely with the other. The impact of smashing blows on naked flesh sounded horribly cruel to Sheba.

She ran forward, calling on each by name to stop. Probably neither knew she was there. Their whole attention was focused on each other. Not for an instant did their eyes wander, for life and death hung on the issue. Chance had lit the spark of their resentment, but long-banked passions were blazing fiercely now.

They got to their feet and fought toe to toe. Sledge-hammer blows beat upon bleeding and disfigured faces. No thought of defense as yet was in the mind of either. The purpose of each was to bruise, maim, make helpless the other. But for the impotent little cries of Sheba no sound broke the stillness save the crunch of their feet on the hard snow, the thud of heavy fists on flesh, and the throaty snarl of their deep, irregular breathing.

Gid Holt, from the window of the cabin, watched the battle with shining eyes. He exulted in every blow of Gordon; he suffered with him when the smashing rights and lefts of Macdonald got home. He shouted jeers, advice, threats, encouragement. If he had had ten thousand dollars wagered on the outcome he could not have been more excited.

Swiftwater Peter, drawn by the cries of Sheba, came running from the stable. As he passed the window, Holt caught him by the arm.

"What are you aimin' to do, Pete? Let 'em alone. Let 'em go to it. They got to have it out. Stop 'em now and they'll get at it with guns."

Sheba ran up, wringing her hands. "Stop them, please. They're killing each other."

"Nothing of the kind, girl. You let 'em alone, Pete. The kid's there every minute, ain't he? Gee, that's a good one, boy. Seven—eleven—ninety-two. 'Attaboy!'"

Macdonald had slipped on the snow and gone down to his hands and knees. Swift as a wildcat the younger man was on top of him. Hampered though he was by his parka, the Scotsman struggled slowly to his feet again. He was much the heavier man, and in spite of his years the stronger. The muscles stood out in knots on his shoulders and across his back, whereas on the body of his more slender opponent they flowed and rippled in rounded symmetry. Active as a heather cat, Elliot was far the quicker of the two.

Half-blinded by the hammering he had received, Gordon changed his method of fighting. He broke away from the clinch and sidestepped the bull-like rush of his foe, covering up as well as he could from the onset. Macdonald pressed the attack and was beaten back by hard, straight lefts and rights to the unprotected face.

The mine-owner shook the matted hair from his swollen eyes and rushed again. He caught an uppercut flush on the end of the chin. It did not even stop him. The weight of his body was in the blow he lashed up from his side.

The knees of Elliot doubled up under him like the blade of a jack-knife. He sank down slowly, turned, got to his hands and knees, and tried to shake off the tons of weight that seemed to be holding him down.

Macdonald seized him about the waist and flung him to the ground. Upon the inert body the victor dropped, his knees clinching the torso of the unconscious man.

"Now, Pete. Go to him!" urged Holt wildly.

But before Swiftwater could move, before the great fist of Macdonald could smash down upon the bleeding face upturned to his, a sharp blow struck the flesh of the raised forearm and for the moment stunned the muscles. The Scotch-Canadian lifted a countenance drunk with rage, passion-tossed.

Slowly the light of reason came back into his eyes. Sheba was standing before him, his rifle in her hand. She had struck him with the butt of it.

"Don't touch him! Don't you dare touch him!" she challenged.

He looked at her long, then let his eyes fall to the battered face of his enemy. Drunkenly he got to his feet and leaned against a willow. He



Like Cave Men They Fought.

forces were spent, his muscles weighted as with lead. But it was not this alone that made his breath come short and raggedly.

Sheba had flung herself down beside her lover. She had caught him tightly in her arms so that his disfigured face lay against her warm bosom. In the eyes lifted to those of the mine-owner was an unconquerable defiance.

"He's mine—mine, you murderer," she panted fiercely. "If you kill him, you must kill me first."

The man she had once promised to marry was looking at a different woman from the girl he had known. The soft, shy youth of her was gone. She was a forest mother of the wilds ready to fight for her young, a wife ready to go to the stake for the husband of her choice. An emotion primitive and poignant had transformed her.

His eyes burned at her the question his parched lips and throat could scarcely utter. "So you . . . love him?"

But though it was in form a question he knew already the answer. For the first time in his life he began to taste the bitterness of defeat. Always he had won what he coveted by brutal force or his stark will. But it was beyond him to compel the love of a girl who had given her heart to another.

"Yes," she answered.

Her hair in two thick braids was flung across her shoulders, her dark head thrown back proudly from the rounded throat.

Macdonald smiled, but there was no mirth in his savage eyes. "Do you know what I want with him—why I have come to get him?"

"No."

"I've come to take him back to Kuslak to be hanged because he murdered Milton, the bank cashier."

The eyes of the woman blazed at him. "Are you mad?"

"It's the truth," Macdonald's voice was curt and harsh. "He and Holt were robbing the bank when Milton came back from the dance at the club. The cowards shot down the old man like a dog. They'll hang for it if it costs me my last penny, so help me God."

"You say it's the truth," she retorted scornfully. "Do you think I don't know you now—how you twist and distort facts to suit your ends? How long is it since your jackal had him arrested for assaulting you—when Wally Selfridge knew—and you knew—that he had risked his life for you and had saved yours by bringing you to Diane's after he had bandaged your wounds?"

"That was different. It was part of the game of politics we were playing."

"You admit that you and your friends lied then. Is it like you could persuade me that you're telling the truth now?"

The big Alaskan shrugged. "Believe it or not as you like. Anyhow, he's going back with me to Kuslak—and Holt, too, if he's here."

An excited cackle cut into the conversation, followed by a drawing announcement from the window. "Your old tilioum is right here, Mac. What's the use of waiting? Why don't you have your hanging-bee now?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

When the Lion Divides.

The capitalist would have you believe that civilization rests on the accumulation of pounds, shillings and pence—the workers, — Sydney Australian Worker.

Always Look Happy.

Why do photographs of woman airplane pilots always show them competing for the record in the standing broad grin? — Pittsburgh Gazette-Times.